

## HOME THEATER

# Women's History Month film picks



## 'Hidden Figures' (2016)

A little-known chapter in the Space Race is laid out in Theodore Melfi's "Hidden Figures." There was a time when math whizzes, not machines, did all the complicated calculations required to construct rockets and determine their trajectories. And math, it turns out, is color blind.

In the 1960s, three black women lived with segregation in Virginia, where they reported to NASA to do this calculating. But NASA was no oasis in the desert of racism.

Taraji B. Henson plays Katherine Johnson, a math genius who struggles to be valued in this racist, sexist milieu. Octavia Spencer plays Dorothy Vaughan, who does the grueling work of a department supervisor, without the title or salary. Singer Janelle Monàe plays Mary Jackson, who, when asked if she would wish to become an engineer if she was a white male, replies: "I'd already *be* one."



## 'The Miracle Worker' (1962)

There are two bravura performances in Arthur Penn's compelling film: Anne Bancroft as live-in tutor Annie Sullivan, and Patty Duke as Annie's blind, deaf charge, Helen Keller (who later became an advocate for the disabled).

Inga Swenson plays Helen's distraught mother Kate, who knows that Helen yearns to communicate. Victor Jory plays Arthur, Helen's imperious father whose own wife calls him "the Captain." But Arthur meets his match in Annie, an Irish tutor brought in from Boston with an uncompromising approach to her work. If she and Helen must physically fight to achieve a spec of progress, so be it.

Annie has her own troubles. She is nearly blind, and has flashbacks to her nightmarish childhood spent in group care.

Bancroft and Duke repeated their performances from the Broadway production, and both won Oscars in their roles.



## 'The Iron Lady' (2011)

It's not merely how Meryl Streep physically transforms herself into Margaret Thatcher, England's only female prime minister (1979-90), who endured many trials from good-old-boy sexism to the Falklands War. As Thatcher in her later years, Streep's "old age" makeup — and her ease within it — is utterly convincing. Phyllida Lloyd crafted a superb movie in which to house Streep's performance.

You are thrown off by the very first frame — a handheld shot of milk cartons in a dingy convenience store fridge. The movie continues to surprise, via superb editing that guides us through hallucinations, flashbacks, dreams and TV news footage, in a story framed around the present-day Thatcher as she slowly succumbs to dementia.

"The Iron Lady" makes you think about life, about the end. What will become of you? Are you ready? It's all here.



## 'The Virgin Queen' (1955)

Where is the line between loyalty to a queen and love for a woman? Henry Koster's soapy CinemaScope spectacle is Bette Davis' second go-round as unlucky-in-love Queen Elizabeth I (the first being 1939's "The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex"). Here, Elizabeth is approached by Walter Raleigh (Richard Todd), who wants, not her heart, but for her to fund his dream, an expedition to the Indies.

Raleigh appeals to Elizabeth because he is a "blunt soldier," not a "smooth-tongued courtier." Elizabeth puts Raleigh in charge of her guard, to the seething jealousy of Sir Christopher (Robert Douglas). Meanwhile, Raleigh catches the eye of the queen's lady-in-waiting (Joan Collins).

Davis captures a weary loneliness in a vanity-be-damned performance. Oddly, there's more swashbuckling in this film than in the 1939 one, which co-starred Errol Flynn!



## 'Norma Rae' (1979)

Sally Field earned an Oscar for her performance as the title character, a cotton-mill worker and exhausted single mother of two whose small-town life is upended when she meets Reuben (Ron Liebman), a unionizer from New York.

At the mill, the hours are long, the pay is low, and cotton dust comes down like snow flurries, making some workers sick. Even so, the mill is the town's main employer, and generations work there. Clever but uneducated, Norma Rae has a checkered past in a town that thrives on gossip. Beau Bridges plays Norma's second husband, Sonny, who balks as she gets more involved with unionizing — and Reuben.

Martin Ritt's "Norma Rae" is based on the true story of Crystal Lee Jordan, a cotton-mill worker who advocated to unionize the J.P. Stevens mills in North Carolina, and, like her screen counterpart, was punished for her efforts.



## 'The Passion of Joan of Arc' (1928)

In her final film and only starring role, Renée Jeanne Falconetti is unforgettable as Joan of Arc, in Carl Theodor Dreyer's silent masterpiece about the trial and execution of the French martyr. You can't look away from Falconetti's eyes. Indeed, Dreyer's cinematographer Rudolph Maté keeps the actress in extreme close-up for much of the film.

The sole woman in the courtroom, Joan cries and prays while steadfastly maintaining her faith, as the grotesque men around her leer, jeer, and take delight in her suffering. Recurring symbolism frames Joan as a Christ figure.

Butchered by censors upon release, a complete print of Dreyer's film was feared non-existent. In 1981, a complete print was discovered in, of all places, a janitor's closet at a mental hospital in Norway. The world is richer for it.

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